

SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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JANET STECHER OF SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS,
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF MUSICIANS LOCALS 76493 & 1000,
INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

INTERVIEWEE: JANET STECHER

INTERVIEWER: CINDY COLE

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[00:00:00] **CINDY COLE:** This is an interview of Janet Stecher, the Music Director of the Seattle Labor Chorus, and it is for the Seattle Labor Chorus Oral History Project. It's taking place in Seattle, Washington on October 21, 2015. The interviewer is Cindy Cole. Janet, why don't you start with where and when you were born?

[00:00:31] **JANET STECHER:** Okay. The very first thing I'm going to say is I love that you almost said "Choral" History Project. That's so lovely.

I was born in Brooklyn, New York—Brooklyn being the largest borough geographically and population-wise, and being a huge center of populations from all over the world. That definitely had an impact on how I viewed life was that everyone spoke many languages, particularly everyone's grandparents, and every place smelled like a different kind of food. That definitely influenced my life. That was in the mid- 50s and it was generally a working-class, middle-class neighborhood, mostly Italian and Irish, which means that my best friends were Catholic, or "Cat'lic," as you say in Brooklyn.

[00:01:35] **CINDY:** Why don't you just talk a little bit about your family, perhaps where they were from and just the various experiences that you had in your childhood?

[00:01:48] **JANET:** Well, there were a lot. Because both of my parents were teachers—my dad being a professor of physics at Cooper Union, a small private school funded by Peter Cooper to allow someone of any wealth or lack of wealth to get a good education. All you needed to do was to have ability. Of course, that's frequently associated with class if you had the opportunity to develop ability. But it allowed many working-class kids to get a higher education.

My mom was an early childhood educator—music, movement and creative drama—and was a renegade. She was definitely an iconoclast. She invented many new ways—not invented, she broadcast many ways of teaching, which reminded teachers that the restriction of a lesson plan on a three-year-old was probably irrelevant. If you didn't already know a whole lot more than that child, maybe you shouldn't be teaching. The gist of some of her thoughts were, whatever they are juiced by, go with that. Teach them something about what they're excited about, what they're doing already. And use movement and song and make up stories about it. She wrote a lot of books and articles. She was either adored or vilified for that role of iconoclast.

As I have described both of my parents' work, I will inform you that it's definitely informed me of how it is that I am in the world, which is to empower those who may not have access to resources, and to encourage people to be creative in what they do. And that both parents were teachers, and they were both in private schools, allowed us to have very long summers because in New York City, private schools closed earlier in the spring than public schools and started later in the fall than public schools. Which means our parents took my brother and I—I have a brother six years older than myself, Jody—we would get out of school early in June and we would all pile into a car—the car my parents had, some used car—and go somewhere in the country for 10 weeks. That would part of the trip along the way. We'd usually land somewhere where my dad would teach a course or take a course. We would stay there for a while and then wended our way back. So, we got to see a lot of the country, and we got to feel very comfortable in small spaces. It was lovely.

[00:04:45] **CINDY:** Also it's my understanding that you had a lot of people who were in the music field around your house. Maybe you can talk a little bit about that.

[00:04:55] **JANET:** Sure. I should say that that aforementioned brother, Jody Stecher, is quite a renowned musician, and started at age 10 or 11 with an old Martin guitar that my mom had. He had a teacher for about

four lessons and then outstripped her. [laughing] A combination of native talent, a great ear. By the time he was 16, he was playing mandolin with the Greenbrier Boys. In the 60s, they were the most well-known pop version—my apologies, Greenbrier Boys were quite authentic—but they were the most popular on the radio in the whole country. There were local folks in the South who were on local radio stations who were certainly better known. Jody started winning mandolin contests as a very early teenager, and was asked to sub with the Greenbrier Boys when he was 16. That was the year we went to Colorado, and that was the first year that my parents and I traveled without my brother. That was hard. I was 10.

Music. My mom's sister, Greta, and my mom were both big fans of folk music. In their libraries, which we came across as teenagers and in our own elderhood when we went through our parents' belongings after they died, there was every issue of Sing Out!, and the predecessors, all of the people's song—they didn't call it a booklet but leaflet or flier—made out to them with their maiden names and at their birth address. So I know it was really early.

Because of this interest in the music of the people's movements for justice, they also hung out with the people who made the music. I was about, I want to say, 45 when I was in Washington, D.C. for one of the great labor arts exchanges—this is an annual celebration of labor culture that took place then at the George Meany Center, which became the National College—and Pete Seeger was there—he would come occasionally—and we were sitting around just gabbing and he said, “You know, your Aunt Greta was a Weaver, right?” This is my mother's younger sister, seven years younger than my mother. It's like “What?” “Yeah, Greta Brodie and Jackie Alper and Ronnie Gilbert were the three women in the Weavers that matched our three guys. We had a couple of rehearsals, because we were preparing to do some rally or something, and we sounded great. We made a date for the next rehearsal and Greta and Jackie said, ‘Again?’ And that's why they didn't last.” As we know, the Weavers are quite accomplished because they practiced. Greta and Jackie didn't stick it out as performers, but they certainly stuck it out in the movement.

Ronnie and my aunt, Greta, were friends for many, many years. Knowing Ronnie's history is not on point here, but she would end up leaving the country, going to Canada. By the time she returned to the States to start her solo career and her career with Holly Near, my aunt had already died. She had died quite young of various strange diseases. She's a textbook case, actually. She's written up in all sorts of stuff. Another sort of sad story, but I will say now—because it's significant in my evolution—that my aunt's death in her forties allowed my mother to move to be a little wilder middle-aged woman.

My aunt, Greta, was the kind of woman who traveled around the world by herself in the 50s and 60s, drove a convertible, didn't wear a bra; was definitely out there leading—it wasn't called women's liberation, it was human liberation. She was being her full self. I think my mom was more of a conservative parent when her sister was possibly a wilder influence. But after her sister died, my mother let her hair grow down to her waist—my mom had long, long silver hair most of my life—and was much more willing to embrace the fullness of what's a good life. I don't know if she would have done that if her sister had survived. It was interesting.

So, yes, music around the house. Records. Singing. My mom used to sing us into the kitchen. [singing] “Dinner! It's dinner! Time to set the table.” Of course, we'd answer: “No, Mom. No, Mom. I'm still watching TV.” We'd turn everything into some kind of commercial because those were the phrases that you were accustomed to that were that short, little jingle. But her profession, her proclivity for developing our expressions, just her plain old preference for having a life that was animated made a very musical life.

Jody played a gazillion instruments. They were all over the house. I had piano lessons, which I didn't like. But my mom—smart mom, very smart mom in many ways—in this case was aware that I loved to sing, so she asked my piano teacher to stop giving me classical stuff and just give me songs. So I learned how to play and

sing at the same time. That was a very significant skill of how to hold counterpoint and harmony in my brain simultaneously.

[00:11:35] **CINDY:** Talk a little bit about your dad.

[00:11:40] **JANET:** Milton Stecher. My came from a fairly Jewish family, but very early on it made no sense to him. He didn't consider himself to have any religion whatsoever. He did, however, bring in the argumentative nature of the Jewish style of learning. I don't know if our listeners would know this. There is a very significant presence in any Jewish cultural house that grew up near anyone who studied religious law and lore. Because the manner in which religious Jews study the Torah and all of the other books is to argue each other out of it. The manner in which a [hedderbacher? Yiddish term] —the [hedder?] means room, the place where Jews study in the village, [bacher?] just means boy, the schoolboy, the student studies as they sit across a bench. You take a premise out of the Torah and you argue what's wrong with it. The religious Jews are so confident that they believe it is absolutely unarguable, and they will prove it to the student by having them argue themselves out of their argument. That is how religious Jews are taught.

But the nature of arguing, that goes into everything. You don't have to be studying Judaism to really arguing. The point is to arrive at the most accurate assessment of phenomena. That is a lofty goal and a lofty engagement. And if you grow up accustomed to it, it's fun. Some people wrestle. It's that, it's intellectual wrestling, and the engagement of engaging those muscles of analysis is enjoyable. You eventually get pinned or or you get tickled, but it's intellectually. So my dad brought that to our household quite certainly, and both my brother and I can argue with the best. He certainly developed my sense of all analysis and math. I'm now a bookkeeper. I was an office manager. I'm very much at ease with concepts.

Both my parents would take the train into Manhattan, come home tired, slog back from the subway and take a nap. Sometimes one of them got home earlier than the other, but in any case, someone would lie down and take a nap. Of course, when your parents came home, you wanted them to pay attention, you wanted to get attention, so the way that my dad handled this was he would say, "Okay, draw your letters on my back." He would be lying on his stomach and I would be sitting on his tush. I would draw letters and he would say, "What does that spell?"

Then we started in on math concepts. We're talking about three years old here. "Draw pi, cut it in half. How many pieces do you have? Cut that in half." So, with this geometry, I learned algebra before I was four or five, the basic concepts of half of what is what? So, a great influence, again, the father analysis. He might have been called a survivalist nowadays. He had no conservative values—he did not own any guns—but he believed that one should not be dependent upon, for him, capitalism to meet your needs. You should not be dependent upon a market. The market was out to get you. One should not be dependent upon the commercials that told you what your needs were. He needed—he was a child of the Depression—he needed to know how to do everything. So, he learned to bake, he learned to upholster, he made clothes, he made furniture, he made a stereo, he made instruments, he designed furniture as well as making it. He designed mosaics, he could do and fixed his own car with a stethoscope. He would go downstairs with a stethoscope and listen to every part of the car and figure it out.

He also had remarkable—I don't know, it's a woo-woo component that I actually don't believe in, but I have the experience of my father. Whenever he found that a part was broken or needed replacement, he would walk around the neighborhood, poking through people's garbage, and find the old discarded appliances in the alleyways and the streets between houses, take it apart, find the part he needed, bring it home and install it. And, of course, it would work again.

One of our family jokes—question mark—was that if he could have gotten away with it, he would have become a surgeon through practice, through trial and error, because that’s how he learned everything. Luckily, he didn’t. I’m not so handy as he, but I definitely learned that you have as little relationship with the marketplace as possible. So, another influence.

[00:17:49] **CINDY:** I remember you talking about when you were an early teenager a demonstration at the UN.

[00:17:58] **JANET:** This is an example of the culture of our family and how embedded social justice and resistance was in our culture. I wanted to go to the movies with my girlfriends. Who knows what was playing? It was probably James Bond of some sort. It’s like “No, we’re getting on the subway in 15 minutes and we’re going to the UN to protest atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. That’s what we do. You can go to the movies another time.” So, that would probably be it, but it was not a significant demonstration to me, it was just significant in that I couldn’t go to the movies. We were all pretty much the same. We got schlepped around by your mom.

[00:18:41] **CINDY:** Yeah. Do you have any memories from your college years?

[00:18:49] **JANET:** I went to school in the late 60s and early 70s, so memories were clouded by other substances. I graduated high school in 1969 and I went to the University of Grenoble in France for a summer trimester. It was only in French. I had already learned some French. We might have to roll back. After my brother stopped traveling with us in the summers, my parents began to take the long summers in Europe. It was not even 20 years after World War II. The teacher charters out of New York were astonishingly cheap. We could go for \$100. So we would spend long summers in Europe.

As a very early child, I didn’t want to do that, and my brilliant mother, again, stashed me in a French school. It was called [French phrase] , vacation studies. And she got me to want to do it because I was a big fan of Helen Keller. She came to me and said, “I found a place you can go. You won’t be able to understand anything, and you don’t have to be deaf or blind. You could be just like Helen Keller.” She totally nailed what I wanted. I was 12 years old. I spent six weeks in a summer studies camp in Switzerland in the early 60s, and came out absolutely fluent in French. Brilliant mom.

After high school I went to the University of Grenoble. My studies were only in French. I fell in love, almost stayed there. It was with—what did he do for a living? I don’t remember. I think he was a factory worker and he had a horse. His name was Michel. Ah! Anyway, I didn’t stay.

I came back and did go to college. But in that last year before I went to college, I didn’t apply to go to college because I didn’t see the point of college. Almost everything I had learned of significance had been through life. I’d learned it from other people, I had learned it through living, I had learned it by proximity and observation and analysis. Why do you have to go to school and pay for it? It seemed absurd.

But I was over at a girlfriend’s house and she had two applications to one college. So, while she filled one out, I filled one out, and she mailed it for me, and so that’s where I went to college. It was the State University of New York in Binghamton. I can tell you that we literally walked through the student center in 1969 singing, “Who will buy this wonderful feeling? I’m so high I swear I could fly.” That was the tenor of the environment, and indeed, they kept us stoned so we wouldn’t protest the war. It was very lenient, and they were quite interested in keeping us a malleable population.

I would choose my classes that were the shortest distance to my dorm, and that nothing started before noon. That’s how I chose all of my classes. I did okay because I was bright. But by the time I was in my junior year, I

wasn't going to school at all. I was just, you know, I'd stay up for a couple of days, sleep for a couple of days, stay up for a couple days and analyze which way the smoke blew.

I can say I learned an enormous amount about human beings, and found myself in a counseling role to many people in my dorm, because, I don't know why. Because I could listen, because I don't know why. But I learned a lot, and I learned how people suffer and create their own suffering. Seriously. [chuckles] The very strange projections of how they evaluate their experiences. So, it was not for naught, and I would not end up getting a degree for another 11 years. But in those intervening years, I coordinated international exchange programs. I lived in many other countries.

I would eventually come back to New York City and enroll in the New York State version of what we have in Washington State. We have Evergreen State College; there they had Empire State College, and you could get credit for life experience. So all of the languages that I had learned along the way, I got evaluated by the same professors who would evaluate you had you taken it at college and got credit for it. I took some classes that were evaluated by oral discussion, sort of thesis events. I didn't find myself a great writer, because I felt that if I put it down, I had to commit to what I put down, and I needed to keep qualifying my thoughts, and I needed to wave my hands in the air when I spoke. Luckily, I had an institution that would allow me to demonstrate my command of the subject by waving my hands around in the air, and honing in on my statement with each successive sentence.

I eventually did get a degree, a B.A. in communication. I studied sociology and social psychology and theater. Did a thesis on international students and how—something about the stranger. How do different cultures treat the stranger? I had a little sidebar about, why do New Yorkers treat strangers better than their own? Which was my experience in the 70s. You absolutely trashed people who should know better, but you were nice to people who couldn't know better. So, there, college.

[00:25:08] **CINDY:** Why don't you talk a little bit about the singing groups that you've been in?

[00:25:15] **JANET:** Okay. While I was coordinating the International Camp Counselor Program—that was for the International Division of the YMCA—we had more than one exchange program. The far larger one brought international students in, but we had a very small one that sent American folks abroad. We had maybe 10 camps that were willing to have American counselors. Most of the other countries required the language. Most Americans don't speak a second language, so it was hard to find counselors to send to countries that required Spanish or French, etc.

One of the experimental programs that we had in the 80s was an exchange with the Soviet Union. As a matter of fact, the International Division and the CYO—that's the Committee of Youth Organizations—were the only organizations in the early 80s that were allowed to have any exchange. This was the height of the Cold War. This was an experiment. The YMCA was participating because they thought if you knew someone, it would be harder to kill them. We don't know why the CYO was involved. In my tenure, no one defected, but it could have happened.

The reason this is important is because into the office walked a waitress from the neighborhood where our office was saying that she wanted to go to Sweden because it was one of the countries that didn't require a language other than English to be a counselor. She had been a dance instructor at the UN School. She had gone to Edmonton, Canada, and lived there and taught dance. She'd even gone to the same college—Harper State SUNY Binghamton—that I had at the same time I had been, but we hadn't known each other. She was in the neighborhood and we would go to the restaurant where she was a waitress. That was Susan Lewis. Susan Lewis would, very shortly after her experience—I'll tell you that we ended up sending her to work in a camp in

Siberia, which really changed her life; totally helped her realize that there were human beings everywhere, and the line she got from her government wasn't true.

We became friends because she participated in that. We'd known each other for a couple of years when we found ourselves in Greenwich Village. Joni Mitchell came on someone's radio—this was New York City—who owned a car, and began singing harmony simultaneously. "I didn't know you sang." "I didn't know you sang." And then we began singing together for fun. We learned American folk songs for international students and international folk songs for American students. Did programs at various international centers for various populations.

I left the country for a while. I would do this on and off in my late teens and early twenties. I would just leave the country for six months, nine months, a year; go bounce around; visit all the international students I had placed in the programs to learn another language. Came back, started working for another international organization. Susan came by my office, because we were rehearsing to do a song. Somebody wanted us to sing the demo of a song she wanted to sell someone.

We were rehearsing in an empty office and a woman came by and knocked on the door and said, "You guys are singers? I'm a singer, too. You want to do my songs?" That was Marcie Boyd, and the duo who were just called Janet and Susan then became the Belles of Hoboken when Marcie Boyd joined us. That trio did Marcie's songs. She had tons of original material, which was very clever; had lots of international songs.

We all had a justice aesthetic. Susan and I were probably working more on personal politics—women's issues, gay issues, the rights for individuals to be able to be whoever they are. Marcie introduced us to Songs of Freedom and Struggle, the People's Music Network. These were two organizers of songwriters and activists on the East Coast that joined in the early 80s, PMNSFS, People's Music Network of Songs of Freedom and Struggle. We began to be introduced to labor politics, international politics, climate politics, through song. We were learning an enormous amount about the history and the analysis of how justice works—or doesn't—and we were doing it through song.

We met amazing writers who would become very close friends and colleagues, people we would tour with. Charlie King, probably the person, I would say, was most influential at that point. He was one of the organizers of the conferences that would happen. He was always to approachable. He was such a great writer and such a darling. In later years, we would tour with Charlie, with Charlie and Karen, with Charlie and various other musicians.

The Belles of Hoboken lasted from—I think we started in the late 70s and went till about 1983. June 12, 1982 being a significant date because that was the million-person march against the bomb in New York. And we had been chosen to headline the folk club—it was called the Speakeasy on McDougal—for that night. Before it was that day, it was absolutely perfect. Lots of people who had been to the demonstration that day, who had come to New York as a destination, came to hear us. We've met many folks all over the country in the 34 years since then who said, "I first saw you in New York!" It was adorable.

The reason that band did not last is because Susan and I each wanted to leave New York City. We did not like—Susan Lewis had her reasons for leaving, and I had my reasons for leaving. My reasons for leaving had to do with living. I didn't like the life I lived when I was in New York. I made much healthier choices when I lived in other countries.

I went back to Europe; tried living in various countries again; learned an awful lot. Learned about cooperative living that this is not just a student phenomenon. There are many people of all ages who live cooperatively.

There are many models in many countries. And that's what kind of cued me into, I think I want to look for that. I want to find someplace else. Let me see, is there anyplace else in the United States I can live?

As it happens, Susan and I each had Seattle on our list of places we would consider moving, so we ended up moving to Seattle. We had one buddy, we had one friend, one singing partner, we had one political ally, and it was great having just that one person. It really helped each of us feel a safety net. We developed our individual lives as well as many shared musical entities. That was your question.

When we came to Seattle, we found the Song Circle that every Sunday I think now for 462 million years, the Seattle Folklore Society meets in somebody's living room and has a song swap. We found that early, and in that circle we ran into John O'Connor and Tim Hall, who were folks who leaned toward the songs of social significance. John in particular wrote many of them. After a year of being in Seattle, we formed Shay's Rebellion. It was a quartet. We sang songs from centuries as well as contemporary material that was addressing the huge breadth of social issues.

We really delved into the labor movement then because of John. That was John's passion. That's pretty much what he wrote about. We learned an enormous amount about labor history through the songs that he brought to us for us to learn so we could sing them for other people. The quartet would then become a trio, the trio then became a duo. Susan and I were left, once again, as the two girls that we had been 30-whatever years before singing international songs to American students and American songs to international students. And we yielded. In 1989, we said, "All right, we're a duo." Then we became Rebel Voices.

Along the way, we also sang with some good buddies in the Solidarity Singers. I sang with Shelley & the Crustaceans, which was a decades-long group of originally 17 people including 12 dancers and tada tada. I joined in the very last throes of their life in 83 and 84. They would have huge extravaganzas. This was resisting nuclear power. That was a lot of fun.

I think that might be it as far as my performance entities.

[00:35:55] **CINDY:** Are you still touring with Rebel Voices?

[00:35:59] **JANET:** Hardly. We do teeny little forays. My life got considerably curtailed in the early 2000s when I needed to do mom care. That lasted almost 10 years. I needed to be close to Seattle, so touring was curtailed quite a bit. And then Susan took care of her mom. Each of our moms has passed on. They each had good, long lives. We miss them but it's okay. [And now old?] . It's quite amazing how people still call out of the blue. "Hey, Janet, fly out to dada dada dada."

What was it? We went to the Centennial of the Bread and Roses strike. That's not recent, that's four years ago. But it's just lovely to get a call. "Why don't you guys come and do this? Come and sing at this festival." Most of what we do is down to Vancouver, Washington, Portland, up to Bellingham. Locally.

[00:37:10] **CINDY:** I remember seeing you at the Vancouver Folk Festival.

[00:37:14] **JANET:** A couple of times, once as Shay's Rebellion and once as Rebel Voices.

[00:37:22] **CINDY:** Do you have any current mentors or people now that influence you? If not, that's okay. I remember you mentioned Geov Parrish to me.

[00:37:40] **JANET:** Oh, there are people whose dedication just stun me, [who sustain?] a lifetime of contribution and dedication to the spirit and the letter of justice. I had mentioned Geov Parrish to you. A lot of

folks know him in our area because he's had a radio show, he's been a columnist. He's actually known nationally and internationally because he's written for so many magazines. He's just brilliant, and so insightful and so empowering of other people to see through . . . what shall I call it? . . . the veil of both being coerced into believing that you need to accept your plight, but also being coerced into being hopeless. I think Geov is great at pointing out not as it should be, here's the point, here's the point, here's the point. Here's how to get where we can be. Let's go.

Someone else who was like that who's not around anymore was Abe Osheroff. I knew him as a veteran of the Abe Lincoln Brigade, and since Rebel Voices had quite a large repertoire of songs from the Spanish Civil War, we would frequently go to VALB events—Veterans of the Abe Lincoln Brigade. That's how I got to know Abe. Just a remarkable person who dedicated his entire life to justice, starting quite young. But I don't know if he would consider it a peak, going off to Europe by boat in the 30s. He landed in France, I think, and then took another boat over to Spain. The boat was torpedoed. It sunk. He swam to shore, and that's where he met another Veteran of the Abe Lincoln Brigade from Seattle, Bob Reed. Quite a story. Anyway, they both survived; came back with great stories and a lifetime dedication to justice.

It was through knowing Abe that I met Abe's wife, Gunnel Clark, another lifelong activist for justice, and quite an accomplished carpenter, which was very unusual for women when she started doing it. She's a member of our chorus—yay—an accomplished singer and organizer as well.

I think it's the individuals. I really do get inspired by small acts, by people who just walk the talk, people who stay the course. Sometimes you have an organization named after you, or a scholarship, or an album. But I get inspired by people who just do it.

[00:41:06] **CINDY:** Maybe you can talk a little bit about how you came to be the Director of the Seattle Labor Chorus.

[00:41:13] **JANET:** It was very reluctantly. This story is in many places, on video at Northwest Folklife, but I'll try to give a terse version. In 1998, the University of Washington was having a large labor conference with a significant labor culture component. They'd invited Pete Seeger. He'd agreed to come. The conference was scheduled for late May, and those of us who were participating in the conference were aware that Pete was coming. We were also aware that the Northwest Folklife Festival was going to be just a couple of days later. And we knew that Folklife had tried for decades to get Pete Seeger to come, and he never would.

The question was posed to Pete, "Would you consider staying a couple of days longer and do something at the Northwest Folklife Festival?" Pete's terms were "Well, maybe, but only if there's a labor chorus to back me up."

Two things occurred. The folks who were active in getting the labor culture component into the UW conference were Bob Barnes, Scott Reed and Lou Truskoff. They would become the folks who would pave the rest of this story. Simultaneously, a couple of them went to Folklife and said, "We might be able to get you Pete Seeger. How much stage time can we get?"

Serendipitously, Folklife had just lost what their focus was. This is not a small f, it's not as if they got confused. The focus, with a capital F, every year is some genre of music, some international group—whatever it is that they thought they had funding for that they were going to bring people from another country had just been lost, and they needed to refocus. In come these two folks saying, "We can make labor the entire focus of your festival if you want, with the foremost voice of justice and working people's issues in the nation." So, that was a yes.

We would end up having, I want to say, maybe 25 slots over the four-day weekend, including a couple of three-hour sets in the stadium, which would end up being quote “sold out.” It’s free so it can’t be sold out, but people up to the bleachers. But we didn’t have a labor chorus yet. We had sold the premise to Folklife—“we,” I’m not in this yet—but Pete wouldn’t actually stay unless there was a labor chorus.

So, Bob and Scott came to me. They came to me because this was Rebel Voices forte, it was Shay’s Rebellion’s forte. All of this material—I taught workshops in harmony; I didn’t have a child; Susan had a child. And would I do it? It’s like, “Absolutely no way. You guys are crazy. It’s February. We have to find a place to rehearse, we have to get the repertoire, we have to find the singers. How in the world are you going to organize this? No, you’re nuts. Goodbye.”

So, they went to Lou. Lou Truskoff said, “What a great idea.” Oy vey. Luckily he has a lovely wife, Joan Truskoff, who’s a great organizer. The two of them found the Electricians to give us a place to rehearse. They did advertising in the Folklore Society, newsletters and in every labor newsletter saying that this was going to come to pass, who was going to do it. The whole team contacted Geoffrey Fairweather, the then-Director of the New York City Labor Chorus, to see if we could get repertoire from them, and find out if the weekend of the festival, would he come out and conduct? They got all those yeses. That’s an awful lot of paving.

But still, Lou comes knocking at my door. “They don’t know how to conduct. Could you just do that? We took care of this, we took care of that.” “I don’t know how to conduct either. I know how to teach singing. Well, Lou, you’ve got yourself in a jam. I will help you out. Yes, we’ll see what’s going to happen.” So that’s how I showed up.

There were 100 people that showed up to sing. Thank goodness the Electricians gave us the space to do it in. We had other individuals in our chorus who must remain nameless because they used their office copiers to get us copies. We learned eight, 10 songs over eight, 10 weeks, which is very quickly. We had several ringers. There were a lot of fairly accomplished musicians in that first chorus. And it was a fabulous experience to back up Pete Seeger, who arrived with his nephew [grandson], Tao Rodriguez, who was still a teenager at the time. He has turned into an awesome musician, and human being as well. He started out pretty darn good. He’s got great depth and breadth.

That’s how we came to be. After that first festival, there were probably 50 people who said that they would like the chorus to go on, and about 20 of them who were actually willing to do the work to see that it would go on. Being the organizers that they are—were—they set about drafting a constitution, which I understand. I think you were there. Were you there, Cindy?

[00:47:55] **CINDY:** Yeah, I was a rep.

[00:47:57] **JANET:** That would be a story in itself, which we’ll put in another portion of this archive. And they asked me to be the Director. I had no intention of doing this beyond those 10 weeks, but I was pretty impressed with what regular old folks could do and how significant the singing had been. This is not original, but I’ll just mention it now. There is nothing like a chorus to exemplify what you can do in solidarity that you can’t do as one. It is just the primo metaphor. And indeed, most of those singers could not have expressed themselves alone, but were so empowered to do it in solidarity as a chorus.

So, I was willing to do it. I said, “Yes.” For many, many years it was a labor of love, occasionally a labor of agitation. Eventually you guys offered me an honorarium, which paid for the gas. That was very nice. Then, as

the chorus became more established, I actually got a paid job with a union. Actually, I don't have a union contract; what I have is a union pension.

I'm a member of the American Federation of Musicians, several locals actually—76493 here in Seattle and Local 1000 for touring musicians, and the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World]. My conditions for being the Director was that all of the business of the chorus needed to be run by committees. Everyone who sang in the chorus needed to have some role, whether they helped put out chair, or figured out what sound equipment we needed if we performed, or did a mailing, or a newsletter, helped choose the material, helped arrange the songs—because I held workshops on how to do all this—and people rose, and I think the structure of this chorus is phenomenal. It's run by everyone. It's borne on every shoulder.

[00:50:31] **CINDY:** Do you think that the Labor Chorus has changed you in any way?

[00:50:39] **JANET:** Oh, my! Well, yes, I've got my 40 best friends. As I said earlier, there are individuals who inspire me. So, yes, I've been inspired many a time by my comrades.

I have a temper. [laughing] And when I see the swiftness way to maximize the limited resources that we have—whether it be finances or the time we have together or the access to space that we have—and I experience people being a little less than ideally cooperative with the needs of this limited resource, I get pissed and I express it. The chorus was quite good in tempering my temper. I learned to be a little kinder in how I pointed out that we only had a limited resource. [laughing] In general, the chorus particularly was inventive and they kept me in line. The little doggy biscuit that keeps Janet's behavior in check is chocolate. Every single time someone would see that I was headed down the path that might not be pleasing for them, up would pop this little square of chocolate put on my keyboard. Oh, good. I would eat some and behave.

[00:52:21] **CINDY:** Do you have any goals that you can see going forward for the Seattle Labor Chorus?

[00:52:31] **JANET:** No, I'm actually quite worried it might not last for several reasons. One, the population that we have is mostly 60s, 70s. Of course, we're about to be 20 years old, so it was 40s and 50s when we started.

The genre of music that we started out with—the folk music, the rewrites of the pop songs or the Broadway songs—were the music that we knew, or at least we knew as white urban-dwellers as kids, and we were very attracted to the genre of music, so it was very easy to learn. We've kept up with that genre of music because that's what we're good at. In younger populations, there's not that much interest in this genre. In the folks who are the core of the chorus, probably not much ability to sing other genres as well. But with a good teacher, I think people could learn to do all sorts of styles. That probably isn't me.

One of the ways that we've tried to expand the chops of our members is during the summer, when we're officially closed, we're down for the season—we go from the week after Labor Day to the week after Memorial Day and we take summers off—we've always tried to schedule one or two workshops in another genre of music or in a style—we're learning rhythm, we're learning theory. That would be a great place for us to try out other styles of singing with a little bit more focus, to figure out, how could we expand, and therefore might we attract people who are interested in other kinds of music, and therefore might have a future?

We've had a handful of what I'll call youngsters, people who are 30-ish or younger. I think they're predominantly interested in the subject. And it is fun to sing, the songs are very well arranged, if I do say so myself—that's because I did them, with a committee. I teach people how to do this but I do it. They're very fun to sing, and they do develop people's ability to sing other things because there's always some kind of musical challenge in them that's easy to surmount.

The other thing is after 20 years, a lot of people are just tired of running things. I think there's a lot of members who would be willing to just coast for a while, just be a singer and not take on a job. But we don't, at this point, have enough active members—I mean, we're about 40 people, you would think that would be enough—to take leadership. We have rotating leadership. Every single year someone else is in charge and someone else is second. But it's tiring.

And, of course, eventually I'll retire. My guess is it's not going to be abrupt. It'll probably be a nice little gradual retreat, but people are going to have to pick up on what I don't do.

So, in the manner of our culture, we will start having meetings, create an ad hoc committee to lead the campaign to dream up, what are the various versions of how we might go? Research it, investigate it, try it out.

I do trust our membership to come up with inspired ideas, and to reach out into the community to find out what don't we know yet, so that we might find out what our future looks like.

[00:56:58] **CINDY:** Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you might want to add?

[00:57:10] **JANET:** Probably. There might be two other things that could be useful in such a record, and that is, what is the role of a labor chorus in any community, or particularly in a workers' community, or particularly in an organized workers' community? And what are the components to be able to replicate this?

Probably a bit of gratitude would need to be expressed to particular people. We have been in Seattle her in the 2000s incredibly fortunate to have fabulous leadership of our Washington State Labor Council. Jeff Johnson, Lynne Dodson—lots of other people who, I apologize, are unnamed here—but the role in acknowledging how significant culture is in sustaining people, in informing people, and keeping a movement going for longer than a lifetime, longer than a campaign, it has to go on and on. And that culture has been used over the centuries, and we don't have to let that go. We need to know what sustained people before us.

The Council created the MayWorks Festival. This is a month-long celebration of labor culture. It happens all over the state, principally in the Puget Sound where there's a little bit more engine, but around the rest of the state. After the chorus realized that, for us to be sustaining—to pay rent, to pay me, to pay copies when they weren't being stolen by our members—we have dues, but no one is forced to pay. Pay what you can.

We used to charge to show up, but the places that we were needed most didn't have the resources. So, how could we create a model that was self-sustaining? We began to sing more for institutions, and then we would go to the institutions and say, "Can you sustain us so we can sing for other people?" And that became the model, including the Washington State Labor Council, including the King County Labor Council, and many, many other unions and other groups and other individuals, so that we could show up wherever we were needed.

Then the model of the Flying Squad showed up. Actions happen when they need to happen, and if we are workers and we're busy in our own jobs and need to stay put and not go out in the middle of the day, there might just be five people or seven people. If the parts they knew of the songs we had learned in harmony weren't the melody, it wasn't going to be a great performance. What was needed was leadership of a repertoire that anybody could sing along with.

So we created this Flying Squad, where whoever was available could show up with a lyric sheet, with melodies that were familiar, or melodies that were so easy to teach that people could pick up on it, so that we were able from the microphone or from the bullhorn or from the picket line to just get people singing. Because it's a whole lot easier to sing than yell, it's a whole lot easier to walk while you're singing, it's a whole lot easier to

feel that you have presence when your voices are raised together. So, that was a wonderful development in the chorus.

I think this model of ground-up leadership, rotating leadership; that everyone takes a turn at stepping into a role that allows everyone else to step back, have a breather; allows everyone to experience, what does it take to drive this Brontosaurus? When you rotate out of the leadership, it makes you a much better follower. It allows different styles to be experienced. It allows different viewpoints to be heard. It's great, it's the way democracy works, it's just really lovely.

We reach out to other choruses to find other material. We reach out to writers to see, do they have something on a topic? We've had members that have had innate talent on writing new lyrics to popular songs. That aforementioned Lou Truskoff has been the author of a dozen of our mainstay songs. But we've developed other writers. That's just awesome. People just e-mail—we do everything by e-mail—saying, “How about this? How about this?” Then you send it to a couple of other people and they change a lyric, and we change the scanning. Even in rehearsal, someone's hand will go up. “Couldn't we change that word?” Or, “Could we change the scanning?” Or, “What would happen if we switched those? Couldn't it be more relevant to that campaign and that campaign?” And, “What if we took the S off there? Wouldn't we sound better without the hisses?”

We're turning into arrangers and musicians and composers. And that evolution of a population both in their personal development and in their development as activists and organizers, that's just fantastic.

I probably could say more, but that's enough.

[01:03:42] **CINDY:** Thank you very much.

[01:03:43] **JANET:** Thank you, Cindy. I'm so glad you're doing this.